DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 226 821 PS 013 329

AUTHOR Niemela, Pirkko
TITLE Overemphasis of "Mother Role" and Development of the Child.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Workshop on Sex Roles, World Federation for Mental Health (Manila, July 27-August 1, 1981).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affective Behavior; Aggression; Cognitive Development; Emotional Development; Foreign Countries; Longitudinal Studies; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; *Personality Traits; Self Esteem; Sex Stereotypes; Verbal Ability; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS Ambivalence (Psychology); Denial (Psychology); Finland; *Idealization

ABSTRACT

Results of a longitudinal study provide several insights into the idealization of motherhood, the idealization of mothers' relationships with their children in the years from 1 to 4, and the development of children of women who idealize motherhood. In the mother, idealization is associated with low self-esteem, denial of ambivalent feelings and concomitant indirect somatic and emotional expression of ambivalence, denial of aggression and feelings of anger, overpossessiveness, and dependency on the child. Children of idealizing mothers are more restless, more clinging, and less capable of concentrating than are other children; they also seem to be less secure. Children of idealizing mothers also score high in aggression on projective tests, with both aggression and revenge of aggression being expressed indirectly. Such children experience both parents as less close, less helpful, and less affectionate than do other children. In addition, the relationship between idealizing parents becomes more distant after the child is born. A net of mutual idealization covers the distant relationships of these couples, with such relationships affecting children's verbal performance. Probably, as time goes by these children will grow more insecure and have lower self-esteem than others studied. Further, it is likely that they will cover their inadequate sense of self by means of stereotypical sex roles. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Work shop on Sex Roles
World Federation for Mental Health
Manila, July 27 - August 1, 1981

ED226821

OVEREMPHASIS OF "MOTHER ROLE" AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

Pirkko Niemelä
Department of Psychology
University of Turku
Kasarminkatu 6
20500 Turku, Finland

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Pirkko Niemelä
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Idealizing Motherhood

In the previous work shop I presented data from my studies on mothers idealizing motherhood (Niemelä 1979). Idealizing motherhood was measured by a scale, which in our longitudinal study was obtained as a separate factor in a factor analysis describing attitudes towards motherhood (Niemelä and Heino 1980). This scale includes the following statements:

- Joy of motherhood can only be felt by a woman who has herself given birth
- Every woman should experience childbirth at least once in her life
- A woman can really feel herself a woman only after giving birth
- Pregnancy and childbirth make a woman a real woman
- I believe motherhood is the most wonderful thing in my life

Mothers who agree highly with these statements are classified as idealizing motherhood.

Search for Self-esteem

Idealizing motherhood can be understood as a way of coping with a fragile self-esteem. According to the data from my research team (Kallio and Lahtinen 1977) women who idealize motherhood have lower self-esteem as women and as persons than do the other women of the study. They like their female body and its functions, such as menstruation and sex, less than the other women of the study. They are less interested

PS 013329

in their work and have less education than the other women. Also, they say they are timid and insecure, and do not trust their own emotions when choosing friends or expressing opinions They also have more distant relationships with other people. As they also estimate the child's significance in a woman's life less than do other women, their emphasis on only mother being a real woman can be understood as a search for identity and self-esteem through motherhood.

According to the idealizing mothers an Ideal Mother is one who Denies Her Own Feelings (patient, always loving, never angry), Forgets about Her Own Needs because of those of the child's (unselfish, self-sacrificing, adapts her life to the child) and Aims to Be A Perfect Mother. The mothers with this mother ideal also state themselves to be closer to this mother ideal than do other mothers. Thus, in order to gain higher self-esteem through motherhood it is not enough for these women just to be mothers: they have to be perfect mothers as well.

Denial of ambivalent feelings

Through many studies (e.g.LeMasters 1957, Bibring 1961 and Niemelä et al 1977) we know that becoming a mother is a major life transition in a woman's life. A mother encounters many conflicts between her roles and interests. The conflicts are reflected in her ambivalence towards her pregnancy, her motherhood and her baby. For most mothers it is at least somewhat difficult to become aware, to accept and work through these ambivalent feelings. Most difficult it certainly is for those mothers who need to be perfect mothers, as the ambivalent feelings do not fit into the image of an Ideal Mother. Therefore idealizing mothers deny these feelings and emphasize only the happy part of their motherhood.

Expression of ambivalence

When the ambivalent feelings are not accepted but denied and repressed, they most probably find their expression through other channels but aware mental processes. Data from our lon-

gitudinal study may be interpreted in this way. For example idealizing mothers experience more pain in childbirth (Niemelä and Heino 1980). They also like breast-feeding less and breast-feed a shorter time even though breast-feeding is emphasized as part of good mothering by Finnish ante-and postnatal nurses. Data about breast-feeding being related to Idealizing Motherhood have been replicated by two studies, one in Finland (Kiviluoto 1980) and the other in Holland (Janssen 1980). It seems that ambivalent feelings express themselves through the body, in birth and in breast-feeding.

During the post partum period these mothers say that they loved their baby from the beginning, that becoming a mother has been the most wonderful thing in their life, that the baby is to them more important than anybody else and that they did not need to give up anything because of the child. On the other hand, they express more fears for the baby than the other mothers do. They fear that something might happen to the baby as it now is completely in their care. They are afraid that the baby might suffocate when sleeping, that they might harm it, and they are worried whether the baby receives enough love and tenderness from them. Instead of admitting to themselves that they feel, besides love and "givingness", also irritation and anger towards the baby, they emphasize only love, but are worried that they might cause damage to the baby. These fears and insecuries might be also understood as an expression of ambivalent feelings.

Mother with her child

In our longitudinal study the mother and the child were interviewed, tested and observed when the child was one, two three and four years old (Huuhka and Vainio 1976, Hiiri and Koski 1977, Mäenpää and Saarinen 1980, Lönnroth 1981). Mothers also later deny their negative feelings and accept no aggression in their relationship with their children. As the mother cannot show direct aggression, she is unable to give proper guidance to the child, but acts too much on the child's

conditions. However, she is insensitive to the child's real needs and cannot give what she/he really needs.

Because she denies her feelings of anger, she emphasizes the opposite behavior. She is overpossessive towards her child. Overpossessiveness might be interpreted as rising out of feelings of guilt because of the unaccepted ambivalent feelings.

An idealizing mother is also more dependent on her child. The idealizing mother needs her child who gives her the role of a mother. She also needs her child for filling her empty life as she has few other interests. She says that when the child is playing out-of-doors she gets bored and does not know what to do alone. A mother who is dependent and possessive might be expected to make the child's separation from the mother more difficult.

One side of the Mother Myth is that the mother is perfect, always loving, never angry. The other side of the Mother Myth is that the child is always nice, happy and smiling. When the children are four years old the idealizing mothers rate their children as nicer than other mothers do. They say that their children do not have any problems and that their children have not been asking about sex. The only problem these mothers admit with their children is eating problem, which these mothers rate highest of all the mothers. It is difficult to know whether these children just do not fulfil their mothers' demands about eating, or whether this is the child's way of resisting her mother, when other ways of showing aggression more directly are not allowed.

The observational data about children

When two, three and four years old the children of idealizing mothers are more restless, more clinging and they concentrate worse than do other children of the study. This might be interpreted to indicate lower feeling of security. It might be that the mothers who are not able to really accept their children create an atmosphere of lack of trust for their child.

The children of the idealizing mothers also seem to be more insecure. When tested and played with them they are rated to be less self-sufficient, they need more encouragement in testing and they have less initiative in playing. As these mothers lay great demands on the children, the children never know when they are good enough. They try to fulfil their mothers' demands. It might be said that their individuation is hindered as they cannot act out of their own needs. The prequisite for individuation process, the process of separation, is also made more difficult by the overpossessive behavior of the mother.

When these children are two and three years old, they are less cooperative and more negative towards the tester than other children are. But when these children are four years old they are as cooperative and good-humoured as other children. The children of idealizing mothers have "learned" to be as nice as expected by the mother. At this age they are apparently able to control their own behavior and be nice, as expected.

The data with projective tests about children

When the children of the longitudinal study were two years old they were showed pictures about family situations and asked to tell what they saw in the pictures. When the children were three years old, they were not interested in these pictures any more and so a doll game was created. A father doll, a mother doll and a child doll were presented in different situations and the child was asked to act out the situation. Both for the picture game and for the doll game rating scales were developped in order to rate the child's answers. When the children were four years old, the Children's Apperception Test (CAT) was used. In this test the child tells stories about pictures presenting animals in different situations. The children stories were analysed by a method developped by Kiviluoto and Parkkinen (1978). The idealizing mothers' children, who were most aggressive towards the tester when two and three years old but very nice and co-operative when four years old, were the most aggressive children according to the CAT data. Their stories contained most aggression.

Through their stories they dared to show aggression. However, even on this level their aggression was indirect. In the stories the aggressive one was somebody else, not the agent they themselves identified with. Further, aggression was also revenged in an indirect way. The children whose mothers do not accept aggression in themselves or in their children, are most aggressive but show it in a very indirect way.

According to the CAT data the idealizing mothers' children have a lower sense of basic security and they are also more dependent and more submissive than other children. These data support observational data. According to the CAT data these children show most emotional disturbance compared to the other children of the study.

According to the CAT data the idealizing mothers' children experience their mothers as less giving of help and affection as well as less close than do other children. Also according to the doll game data, when these children were three years old, it was the idealizing mothers' children who experienced their mothers less close.

According to the CAT data, the children of idealizing mothers experience their fathers, too, in the same way as their mothers, i.e. less giving, less helping, less close, than do other children. This shows that the children are disappointed also in their relationship with their fathers.

The net of idealization

The children experience their idealizing mothers and their fathers in the same way. How is this to be understood? An examination of the data about the relationship between the father and the mother shows that their mutual relationship becomes more distant after the child is born. The mothers become bitter towards their husbands and complain about sex being less satisfying for them. However, when the mothers and the fathers rate themselves and their spouses as parents, they give a

similar picture. The mothers rate themselves ideal as mothers, and they rate their husbands in the same way. Similarly, the fathers have very high demands for both the mother and the father as a parent. They rate themselves as fulfilling their demands and also they rate their wives as ideal mothers. A net of mutual idealization covers the distant relationships for these couples.

The data from a communication test

A test measuring verbal development, ITPA (Kuusinen and Blåfield 1974) was also used. Already when three years of age the idealizing mothers' children showed lower performance in understanding verbal information. The same result was obtained also when the children were four years old, but at this time the same children expressed themselves more badly in speech than the other children did. The idealizing mothers' children were not worse on all the subscales of the test. Therefore these ITPA data cannot be interpreted here as due to a generally lower level of intelligence but rather as a result of more distant relationship with the people closest to them. Unfortunately lower verbal performance is not only a consequence of more distant social relationships but being able to understand and express less verbally certainly brings even more insecurity and distance to relationshps with both adults and children.

Insecurity and development of infexible sex roles

Probably these children grow to be more insecure and to have lower self-esteem than other children of the study. They come to trust their own emotions very little, as do their mothers, because their real emotions are not accepted, neither by their mothers nor by themselves. Further, they will perhaps also develop less adequate ways of communicating, and they will become more distant in the relationships with other people - just like their mothers. Thus they "inherit" from their mothers (and fathers) insecurity about themselves and about other people.

Further, these children probably grow to be adults who compensate for their low self-esteem by means of stereotypic images of "real" men and women: they will cover and hide their missing sense of what they really are by means of false self.

REFERENCES

Bibring, G.L. A study of the psychological processes in pregnancy and of the earliest mother-child relationship. In Eissler, R.S. (Ed) The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child. London: The Hogarth Press. 1961.

Hiiri, S. and Koski, A., 2-vuotiaan lapsen emotionaalinen käyttäytyminen suhteessa siihen miten äiti hyväksyy ja kokee äitiytensä. An unpublished MA thesis in Psychology, University of Turku 1981.

Huuhka, J. and Vainio, A. Äidin persoonallisuus ja elämäntilanne yksi vuosi lapsen syntymän jälkeen. An unpublished MA thesis in Psychology, University of Turku 1976.

Janssen, M. Unpublished data, personal communication, 1980.

Kallio, K. and Lahtinen, H. Heikon ja vahvan identiteetin kuvaaminen 30-40-vuotialla naisilla. An unpublished MA thesis in Psychology, University of Turku 1981.

Kiviluoto, H. Synnyttävän perheen vuorovaikutusprosessin kehityksestä. (The development of interaction in a young family.) Department of Psychology, University of Turku, Report No 43, 1980.

Kiviluoto, H. and Parkkinen, T., CAT osallistumisen mittana. Psykologinen kustannus, Helsinki 1978.

Kuusinen, J. and Blåfield, L. Psykolingvististen kykyjen testi ITPA. (ITPA measuring psycholinguistic abilities). Reports from the educational research center, University of Jyväskylä, No 234, 1974.

LeMasters, E.E. Parenthood as crisis. Marriage and family living, 19, 352-355, 1957.

Lönnroth, M., 3-vuotiaan lapsen sosiaalis-emotionaalinen kehitystaso ja käyttäytyminen suhteessa siihen, miten äiti suhtautuu omaan itseensä ja äitiyteen. An unpublished MA thesis in Psychology, University of Turku 1981.

Mäenpää, S. and Saarinen, P. Äidin asenteiden ja puolisoiden välisen suhteen yhteys 4-vuotiaan lapsen emotionaaliseen, sosiaaliseen ja kognitiiviseen kehitykseen. An unpublished MA thesis in Psychology, University of Turku, 1980.

Niemelä, P. Overemphasis of Mother Role and Inflexibility of Roles. World Federation for Mental Health Congress 1979. In Sex Role Attitudes and Cultural Change. Eds. Ira Gross and John Downing. D. Reidel publishing Company of Holland. In press.

Niemelä, P., Engblom, P. and Erkkola, R., Psychological Preparation for Parenthood. The V International Congress of Psychosomatic Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Rome, 1977. Academic Press,

Niemelä, P. and Heino, L., Äitiyden hyväksyminen ja synnytys. (Acceptance of motherhood and childbirth). Department of Psychology, University of Turku, Report No 38, 1980.